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Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Global Britain, HC 780](#)

Tuesday 6 February 2018

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Members present: Tom Tugendhat (Chair); Ian Austin; Chris Bryant; Ann Clwyd; Mike Gapes; Stephen Gethins; Ian Murray; Andrew Rosindell.

Questions 69-117

Witness

I: Sir Simon Fraser GCMG, former Permanent Secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Head of the UK Diplomatic Service.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Simon Fraser.

Chair: Sir Simon, thank you very much for joining us this afternoon. It is a great pleasure to have you before the Foreign Affairs Committee. I know that it is not your first appearance before the Committee, so you will be used to the format. We will try to be short, and short, to-the-point answers would be great.

Q69 **Mike Gapes:** Welcome. How, in your opinion, does Global Britain differ from the UK's previous foreign policy? Haven't we always had a global orientation to our foreign policy?

Sir Simon Fraser: Yes, that is true. I do not think that Global Britain is different from the foreign policy that we have been pursuing in the past. Global Britain at the moment is a bit of a slogan, or a headline, that people are using with different intent. For example, some people who support Brexit are using it to indicate that this is not about the country turning in on itself, that it is not a little Britain agenda, and they are also using it to imply that somehow leaving the EU will enable us to exercise wider international influence. That is an argument I do not support, but I understand it. I think that the Government, more generally, is using it to indicate that we will continue to be an outward-looking country that is seeking to be influential in the world, which is consistent with our previous foreign policy stance.

Q70 **Mike Gapes:** How would you describe the direction of our foreign policy when you were permanent secretary?

Sir Simon Fraser: I was permanent secretary between 2010 and 2015, which was the period of the coalition Government, and it was a period of extreme turbulence in international affairs. It was a period of crisis management, largely. We had the Arab spring, the Ukraine crisis, Ebola and a whole range of other international crises that we had to respond to. Our foreign policy was in many respects very reactive. There was also the Libya crisis, the Syria war and all these major events, and it was a tough time in foreign policy. One of the lessons I learned from that, which I think is relevant to our discussion today, is that for us to be effective in dealing with these major international events it is important that we work closely with other countries that share our interests and our ambitions in the world.

Q71 **Mike Gapes:** We will no doubt come on to that with other questions. How many of the initiatives that you were involved in between 2010 to 2015 are still continuing and are badged as part of Global Britain today?

Sir Simon Fraser: As I say, I am not sure exactly at the moment what Global Britain consists of. The Prime Minister has had two opportunities recently, at Davos and in China, to explain it further, but she has not taken them. It would be desirable if a bit more clarity and content were



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put behind the headline. There are a number of initiatives that we launched when I was in the Foreign Office, where Britain took a lead in particular areas of foreign policy—for example in Somalia, where we are still actively engaged and working with others to pursue those objectives. That is all part of what I take to be the ongoing intention of this country to have an outward-looking stance, and to seek to influence the world in what we think are the best directions for it to take.

- Q72 **Ian Murray:** You said in your response that you were permanent secretary at a very turbulent time, and one of the key things that you learned during that period was that the UK had to work very closely with allies to respond effectively. You said in your November Chatham House speech that you cannot recall an instance when Britain has played an influential role in foreign policy since the referendum. Does that fit with what you have said about your period in office?

Sir Simon Fraser: I do not see why it is inconsistent. In that speech I was saying that I cannot think of an instance since 2016 when Britain has really taken the initiative and given leadership in foreign policy. If you find instances where we have, I am happy to discuss them. People voted for Brexit for a wide range of reasons that we need to understand and respect, but in foreign policy terms I think that one of the consequences has been, and will be, a reduction in our international influence and leverage. I was trying to exemplify that in my speech.

- Q73 **Andrew Rosindell:** Good afternoon, Sir Simon. Do you believe that the objectives of Global Britain are known and understood? Do countries around the world, particularly our close allies, get what it is all about?

Sir Simon Fraser: At the moment, I do not think that they are understood by other countries because, as I said, the concept has not really been developed. I think many other countries around the world are looking at us at the moment in a state of some concern. They are not clear on the direction that we are taking, and are looking for clarity about that. The more evidence we can give of how we want to work with our European allies, America and our NATO allies, and the more clarity that we can give on what we are intending to do in our relations with other countries around the world, the better.

To be frank with you, I think that many countries think that, for the time being, we have slightly lost the plot in terms of understanding where we intend to go. It also has to be said that, in terms of the big geopolitical strategy, while Brexit is consuming us in this country, it is not the central deal in global geopolitics that, for example, the emergence and growth of China and those great shifts in the world are. We have to think about where we are going to fit into that evolving picture internationally.

- Q74 **Andrew Rosindell:** Do you feel that Global Britain is, at the moment, just a marketing exercise? Do you not feel that a lot more needs to be done urgently to change that perception and turn it into something that is truly meaningful, utilising all Government Departments, especially the Foreign Office, as well as the BBC World Service, the Westminster



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Foundation for Democracy, the British Council, and all the other arms and powerful bodies that we have at our disposal?

Sir Simon Fraser: I agree with you. I think that Global Britain at the moment is, as I said, really a slogan. We need much more clarity of thought behind it. As I said in the speech that Mr Murray referred to, it seems to me that we need to sit down and calmly and hard-headedly think through, if we are going to leave the European Union, where that will leave us on the international stage. What are the objectives that this country, outside the European Union, would seek to achieve in its international policies? What are the priorities for us? What is the message that we want to give to the world, as a former member of the European Union? What are the relationships, institutions and other methods of leverage that we are going to use to seek to achieve our goals?

To be honest, at the moment I think that there is a lot of rather mushy thinking about this, and a lot of rather simplistic words. We need to sit down and put hard content behind it.

- Q75 **Andrew Rosindell:** How do you see Britain's overseas territories playing a role in Global Britain? For a long time, the FCO has taken a slightly half-hearted attitude to the overseas territories and not fully treated them in the way that they would have liked. Now they could be strategically important to us, scattered around the world, particularly places that have strong loyalty to the UK and would, therefore, want to be part of any Global Britain strategy. How do you see that happening?

Sir Simon Fraser: I know that you have a particular interest in the overseas territories, which we have discussed in the past. It is very important that we maintain our focus on the overseas territories and carry out our responsibilities to them. Indeed, it is right that they will be part of the way in which Britain is represented around the world and part of our presence around the world.

It is important that we give due weight to that. But this, of course, links to a point that you alluded to in your earlier question, about the resources we are going to have at our disposal, in different ways in different places, in order to achieve the headline aspirations of Global Britain in the years ahead.

- Q76 **Andrew Rosindell:** Who are the new friends that the Government feel we should engage with? The Minister referred to new friends. It is fantastic that we have new friends, but who are they? How do you see the Government building that relationship to make it meaningful?

Sir Simon Fraser: I do not speak on behalf of the Government any more. My view is that the core and most important relationships for this country are with our democratic partners and friends in Europe, in North America, in the old Commonwealth, in Japan. Those are not new relationships; I would argue that they are long-standing, well-established relationships. I do not think that the primacy of those relationships in our international policy is going to change. It would be a huge mistake for us to step away



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from those relationships and from the family of western democracies, which we are so closely a part of and at the heart of.

At the same time, I recognise—and this is not new, either—that as the world changes we should be seeking to develop new relationships with other countries. When I was permanent secretary in the Foreign Office, with William Hague as Foreign Secretary, as you know we made a big effort to push resources into countries such as China, India and Brazil in order to try to exploit the opportunities in those relationships, both politically and economically, and we should continue to do that. But the quality of the relationships that we have with our partner democracies in Europe and the west is of a different order from the quality of the relationships that we have with most of those other countries, and we should not lose sight of that.

- Q77 Andrew Rosindell:** Finally, to sum up on this, do you feel that, although at the moment it all seems a bit muddled—the water is muddled and we are not quite sure where we are going on this—in the end it will force Britain to stand on its own two feet again; not to rely on the European Union or a collection of countries to come to a consensus, but to chart out our own foreign policy and destiny as a nation with our own trading partners? Do you not think that the EU has made Britain a little bit complacent and slightly lazy in all of this? Although it is an adjustment, in years to come—in the next decade—Britain could actually be a lot stronger, having been forced to get on with the job of promoting everything that our country has to offer.

Sir Simon Fraser: I think there will be opportunities. There are always opportunities that we can seek to pursue; I don't deny that. You may be right that it is useful for us to be challenged in this way. I would just say that we have been thinking about these things for some years, and I think the European Union has been a very strong multiplier of our foreign policy.

Actually, I find it hard to think of an example where the European Union has stopped us doing what we want to do in foreign policy. Perhaps, in the case of Iraq, it might have been a good idea if they had. I don't see many cases in which we have been inhibited. On the whole, I see our membership of the European Union as having been a net-plus benefit for us in international affairs.

I think it is important, as you highlighted in your report on diplomacy in Europe, that we maintain the closest possible institutionalised relationship with the European Union. It may be that in 20 years' time there will be very different opportunities that we will have taken and benefited from, but the opportunity cost of getting there is likely to be high.

- Q78 Chair:** May I go back briefly to some points you were making about Global Britain and it not being defined? The Prime Minister spoke to the BBC's Laura Kuenssberg on 2 February and said, "Companies will be selling more Great British products to China as a result of this trip. There will be more people in jobs in the UK as a result of this trip. That's Global Britain in action." Do you accept that?



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Sir Simon Fraser: I accept that the Prime Minister appears to have concluded some trade deals in China on the visit, as previous Prime Ministers have done on previous visits, but it does not seem to me to be relevant to the issue of whether or not we are in or out of the European Union. Of course, the aspiration to build the economic relationship with China is the correct aspiration, and a very high-priority aspiration. If it does lead to more trade and more jobs, that is a very good thing.

Q79 **Chair:** If we can come back to the Global Britain question, do you think she is clarifying clearly enough?

Sir Simon Fraser: No. As I have said, I do not think there is sufficient clarity and content on what Global Britain will actually mean and the ways in which it will be different from what we have had before and the ways in which we will be better able to pursue it outside the European Union. Of course, that partly links to the question about the opportunity for new trade deals once we are outside the European Union, which depends on the nature of the Brexit we have. That, of course, is under discussion this very week. I am one of those who believe that while there will be opportunities, we would be unwise to exaggerate the scale of those opportunities in the short to medium term.

Q80 **Chris Bryant:** I am hoping to be generous to the Prime Minister on this, because you are basically saying that there is no clarity and that it is all as clear as mud.

Sir Simon Fraser: Those were not my words.

Q81 **Chris Bryant:** I am paraphrasing. When I was a vicar, at the end of funerals the organist just used to play any old music until everyone had left the church, and we used to call that “vamp till ready.” Global Britain is basically that, is it not? It is “vamp till ready”. They are just going to make any old noise until they have come up with a decision and some kind of policy for the future. Is that not quite a sensible thing to do, to be honest? Bung any old slogan up—

Sir Simon Fraser: Isn’t that quite a sensible thing to do—is that what you are asking?

Chris Bryant: Yes. Until we get to the point where we know what Brexit really looks like—I am trying to be generous to her.

Sir Simon Fraser: I do not think I will interfere with your relationship with the Prime Minister, Mr Bryant.

Chair: This is an unusual state of affairs.

Sir Simon Fraser: It seems to me that Global Britain is a very sensible aspiration, as it was three years ago, because it is the self-image of this country that we want to have a global foreign policy.

Chris Bryant: We just don’t know what it is.

Sir Simon Fraser: It was the policy of the Foreign Secretary when I was permanent secretary that we should be present around the world, in as



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many places as possible, so that we were engaged in networks around the world and able to influence events, and I think that is a good policy. The challenge for us, in my view, is that withdrawing from the European Union is a step in a fundamentally different direction. It is a withdrawal from a very important network—possible the most important network this country is involved with.

Q82 **Chris Bryant:** So it deglobalises us.

Sir Simon Fraser: I am not saying it deglobalises us. I think it creates a challenge as to how we are going to pursue our global aspirations in different circumstances. Any country can have an independent foreign policy and an independent voice—Mauritania has that. The question is what you can achieve and how you can leverage instruments and relationships to achieve your goals. That is the challenge that faces us now.

Q83 **Chair:** Who should own that conversation? Is it the PUS—your successor—or the Foreign Secretary or the Prime Minister?

Sir Simon Fraser: There is an interesting set of issues about how Whitehall is organised to deal with international affairs after Brexit, but one of the things I would say is that I feel that the Foreign Office could take a more assertive role institutionally in sketching out what Global Britain means and setting out the outline of that. I would like to see that. I would like to see the Foreign Office, whose role it is, giving leadership across Government, in explaining what the issues, challenges and opportunities are, and how we should organise to pursue them; and of course, in any well-run Ministry, the Minister and the permanent secretary operate in tandem.

Q84 **Ian Murray:** You just mentioned that we should look at how Whitehall is organised. Do you think the creation of DExEU has undermined the Foreign Office somewhat in the Global Britain strategy?

Sir Simon Fraser: There is a broader issue about the organisation of Whitehall in international affairs, which is very interesting. It has been at the same time sort of fragmented and also, ironically, centralised. So you have a large number of Ministries—Departments that are now dealing with different aspects of international affairs—including the Foreign Office, the Department for International Trade, the MoD, the Treasury, BEIS and DFID. There is to some extent a fragmentation of responsibility and different budgets applied to international affairs. At the same time, you have had the creation of the National Security Secretariat, which certainly under Prime Ministers such as Blair and Cameron—of course, it was David Cameron who created it, but it nevertheless sort of continued a tendency that I think Tony Blair had established, which was a centripetal effect in foreign policy. So there is a bit of a lack of clarity, it seems to me. I do think if we are going to pursue the future foreign policy agenda successfully, we need to find ways of aligning the different resources behind a clear set of shared objectives, and having effective joint external action—I don't like to use those words—to pursue them on behalf of the country. We could do that better, I think, than we do it at the moment.



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Q85 **Ian Murray:** In all those Departments—DExEU, DFID, International Trade—the resources have come from the FCO.

Sir Simon Fraser: To some extent, that is true.

Q86 **Ian Murray:** Do you think that is the FCO's responsibility?

Sir Simon Fraser: I am not familiar with all the detail of the figures, but it is true that staff have gone from the Foreign Office to DExEU; some have gone to International Trade. My own view, actually, is that the Department for International Trade should have been part of the Foreign Office, as is the case with Australia, Canada and many other countries whose systems we admire. But it is true that one of the consequences of this is that the Foreign Office has lost some of its resource, and I think its role in helping to deliver Brexit and what comes after Brexit could usefully be clarified and reinforced. And it should have a convening role across Whitehall in helping us think through the most effective way forward.

Chair: Ian, do you want to come in?

Ian Austin: No, the points I wanted to raise have been covered.

Q87 **Stephen Gethins:** Earlier, you talked about the message that Global Britain sends out. What kind of message do you think the UK is sending out to the world at the moment?

Sir Simon Fraser: If I am honest, I think that we are sending a rather confused message to the world, and I think the fact that we appear unable to clarify what we mean by Brexit, and what sort of Brexit we are pursuing, does not give a very strong impression internationally. I think we should be concerned about that, and we should avoid becoming over-consumed in our national debate about Brexit at the expense of understanding the potential cost of this for our international standing. So, I am a bit concerned about that. For example, I think the Prime Minister's spokesman said yesterday that Brexit is about "the freedom to strike out into the world". I don't know what that means, and therefore I expect other people don't quite know what it means. I think we should be careful to avoid doing unnecessary harm to our relationships through the uncertainty that has been created around this, which is why, as I said earlier, the more clarity we can bring to bear and the more conviction we can have about our future position, the better. As I have said already, in foreign policy terms I think Brexit is a strategic error, which will be deleterious for this country, but if that is what we are going to do, I think it is very important that we do it in a convincing manner, with as much clarity and conviction as we can.

Q88 **Stephen Gethins:** That is very helpful, thank you. In terms of the vision or message of Global Britain, do you think it is possible to set that out before we know what our relationship with the rest of Europe or with the European Union is going to look like?

Sir Simon Fraser: In many ways, the detail is difficult because, as you are alluding to, until we have established what the relationship with the European Union is going to be and what our position in the WTO and in



other international agreements and organisations is going to be, it is difficult to develop many of the policies in detail. But, for example, I do not see why we cannot say that the core priorities of British foreign policy will be around supporting and maintaining a rules-based international system, having effective policies on climate change and the environment, dealing with the new security challenges around cyber and data protection, and dealing with the demographic challenge of Africa—big issues of that sort, which should preoccupy us, and on which this country has a very credible record, where we should be able to establish what we stand for, and want to stand for, in the world. That can be done, even if the precise mechanics of achieving it at the moment are not clear.

Q89 Stephen Gethins: In terms of delivering that, who do you think our natural partners would be, among the Western democracies you mentioned earlier?

Sir Simon Fraser: I think we need to try to establish relationships and partnerships around the world to deliver those big objectives. But I do believe that at the heart of that is our relationship with our Western allies in Europe and North America, our NATO allies, countries that share our general view of the world—our values and approach to the world—the rich democracies that have a big impact in the world. But, at the same time, if we are going to have effective policies on, for example, climate change, we have to work with India and China and those big emitting countries. The question is: how do we get the best leverage? Through what institutions, relationships and partnerships do we get the leverage to achieve our goals?

Q90 Stephen Gethins: I have just two more questions. If I may bring you back to your comments on trade, you made some interesting comments about the Prime Minister's visit to China. In terms of trade, what impact do you think this will have on our old friends with whom we do an enormous amount of trade elsewhere in the European Union?

Sir Simon Fraser: To some extent, it depends on the nature of the agreement that we strike with the European Union—assuming we leave. No form of Brexit, in terms of our economic relationship with Europe and with the European Union, is a good form. It is about degrees of disadvantage. That is very important. Considering that, as we know, the familiar figure is that in the region of 45% of our trade is with the European Union and a further 15% is conducted with other countries where we have free trade agreements that give us preferences through the European Union. Clearly there is going to be a disadvantage for us in leaving the European Union, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the nature of Brexit. The idea that we can replace the trade we lose in Europe easily through creating new trade relationships with, for example, the BRICS countries or others, needs to be carefully examined, because they collectively account for less than 10% of our trade, just as the Commonwealth collectively accounts for less than 10%. So on the relative shift, if you lose 5% of your trade in the EU you need to increase your trade with the BRICS by 25% to offset that. I am not saying that that is impossible, but I think it is impossible in the short to medium term.



- Q91 Stephen Gethins:** So do you think that the analysis that was leaked last week—I know you would not want to comment on leaked documents but it was the same as the Scottish Government’s, which was published—showing degrees of reduction of 2.5% down to 8% depending on the deal you reach, sounds about right?

Chair: It was slower growth rather than a reduction.

Sir Simon Fraser: I am not going to comment, if you don’t mind, on the figures, but I accept the basic thesis that if we leave the European Union we will have slower growth in our economy over the next few years than we would have had, had we stayed in. I do not know what the degree of magnitude is and, as I say, it depends on the model. The other interesting thing about that document was that it gave some figures for the prospective gains from trade deals with other countries that were very low. Again, I do not know what the model was behind that, so I cannot comment on the detail, but I do think it is important to at least be realistic about what the opportunities are.

- Q92 Stephen Gethins:** What would success in delivering Global Britain look like, do you think?

Sir Simon Fraser: Foreign policy starts at home. So, for me, success in delivering Global Britain is the same as success in delivering any foreign policy. If our security is maintained and enhanced in this country, if our prosperity is maintained and increased, if our society remains harmonious and peaceful, and if our foreign policy is contributing to that through trade and other things, that all seems to be the metric of success. Equally abroad, if we are influencing the world in the ways we want, if we are contributing to the spread of democracy and prosperity, if we are contributing to stopping conflicts, and if we are exerting influence in international bodies in the way we want, those are metrics of success that we should apply. Whatever your policy is, you still measure it by the same metrics.

- Q93 Chair:** Following on from that, Lord Owen said that the UK’s independent voice on foreign policy had diminished. Do you agree that our membership of the EU has been a limiting factor over the years? I do not mean just in the last year.

Sir Simon Fraser: I do not agree with that. I do not agree that the European Union has inhibited our foreign policy. As I said earlier, it is part of this rather simplistic debate about sovereignty that we are having at the moment. You can have an independent foreign policy, but if you do not have the instruments, partnerships or relationships to deliver it, then it does not count for a lot of good and does not in fact enhance your sovereignty or your ability to get your way in the world.

I think that on balance the evidence is that the European Union has helped us to project our influence on the world. Of course the European Union has shortcomings in its foreign policy activity, and we do not always agree with all the other European Union members. But when you can mobilise 28 of the richest and most democratic countries in the world representing 500



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million people behind your policy, it is a significant thing to be able to achieve. We will not be in a position to mobilise that in future in the way that we have been in the past.

- Q94 **Chair:** But Britain's foreign policy—even as part of the European Union—has not always been at the forefront in the way that some of us would wish. I am thinking of things like the Normandy process, where Britain has not played her role despite being one of the signatories of the Budapest memorandum. Has the European Union in any way contributed to our laziness, perhaps?

Sir Simon Fraser: Laziness? I'm not sure we have been lazy. I am not suggesting that our foreign policy has been an unmitigated success in all its aspects—far from it. I have lived through some of the challenges and difficulties that we have experienced in, for example, Libya, which was when I was permanent secretary. This was a foreign policy initiative that I thought was justified, but whose execution proved to be challenging. My point is this: in what way would our influence on the Ukraine problem have been stronger if we had not been a member of the European Union? I cannot think that it would have been.

Let's take the other example of Iran. I believe that the fact that we were an active member of the European Union, working in that format—the P5+1—with the special representative of the European Union¹ sitting alongside the Secretary of State of the United States, helped us to contribute very significantly to the achievement of that agreement.

- Q95 **Chair:** May I put those the other way round? If we had not been a member of the European Union, would our position on the P5+1 really have been diminished? Perhaps in reverse, also, had we not been a member of the European Union, would we have stood aside in the way we did when France and Germany and others got involved in the Budapest memorandum?

Sir Simon Fraser: On the latter point on whether we would have stood aside, I am not sure that we did stand aside, frankly. We did not play a leading role, but we were actively involved in the discussions around it. I do not see what the locus would have been. If Germany and France were running a policy with the blessing of the United States and Russia, where would the United Kingdom, have been running a parallel policy, that would have been effective? That is the question one needs to ask. Because we are a member of the P5, we would have been involved in that format, but I think that our influence on, for example, the European Union's Special High Representative² in that negotiation, and our ability to influence France, Germany and others, would probably have been less.

- Q96 **Chris Bryant:** Moving on to the UN element, you said in your Chatham House speech that you were worried that there would be lots of raised eyebrows about Britain's continuing veto vote on the Security Council.

¹ Clarification from witness: should read as 'High Representative of the European Union'

² Clarification from witness: should read as 'High Representative of the European Union'



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How strong is your feeling on that?

Sir Simon Fraser: I do not think that our position as a permanent member of the Security Council is under threat. I know you have had other witnesses, and you have talked to them about that. Again, in an organisation like the United Nations you need to have good ideas, good diplomacy and good leverage to deliver through the system. The EU has been important for us in that respect. If we leave the European Union, we are going to be more of an individual player on the Security Council. France will continue to speak, not on behalf of, but with 27 other roughly aligned European member states behind it. We will not have quite that position. Therefore, the significance of our position on the Security Council, or the influence that we can wield through it, may be called into question. That is the question that I was alluding to.

Q97 **Chris Bryant:** So do you think that France will have a more respected and impactful role? Would that be your broad expectation?

Sir Simon Fraser: Let's say you are the United States, seeking to secure backing for a resolution in the Security Council. It is very important for you to get the European Union on your side. Currently, you go to Britain and France on the Security Council and expect them to be able to align the EU. In future, you will go to France and expect it to align the EU. You might hope that Britain will help and be part of the business, but Britain will not be as integral to the corralling of a European Union position as we have been so far.

Q98 **Chris Bryant:** In the past, our unique selling point was that we ran a quarter of the globe. I am talking about quite a while ago now, before any of us in this room were around.

Sir Simon Fraser: That was even before I was permanent secretary.

Q99 **Chris Bryant:** Even before that. That was our unique selling point—what will it be now, do you think?

Sir Simon Fraser: That is an interesting question. It will not be the one that we had in the past, which I suppose, at one point, was that we had the Empire, the Commonwealth and then the European Union. We will have to look at different ways of exerting international influence, through the agility of our diplomacy, the relationships that we build, and the positions that we take on issues. However, fundamentally and structurally I think our position, and our leverage in international institutions, will be weaker once we have left the European Union.

Q100 **Chris Bryant:** But you're convinced that our P5 membership is not under threat. Even those who have wanted to reform it in the ways that we have wanted to reform it have found it very difficult to change the United Nations, haven't they?

Sir Simon Fraser: One argument has been about expanding the membership of the Security Council. There is a different argument about removing the veto or the permanent member status from those who have it. That is very complicated, and frankly I do not think that it is an issue

that we need to be very concerned about. What we need to be concerned about is our ability to use the incredibly important global forum of the United Nations as a vehicle to project in the world our views, values and the policies that we want to achieve.

Q101 **Chris Bryant:** And you reckon that is going to be more difficult?

Sir Simon Fraser: So far as I can see, our leverage will be reduced.

Mike Gapes: You have already mentioned the Iranian P5+1 deal. Baroness Ashton played a vital role in that and, coincidentally, was the High Representative who was the British Commissioner. Clearly that gave us a big locus as a nation, because the British Government gave her a lot of support, as you will be aware, in that position. The fact that there will never be, if we leave the EU, another UK High Representative is clearly a loss of influence, isn't it?

Sir Simon Fraser: I think she did an excellent job on that negotiation. It was good that she was there. She was, of course, not representing Britain, but she was a British person in the role and she worked closely with my colleagues in the Foreign Office, who made a very good contribution to that negotiation. Of course, it is true that we will no longer be eligible to occupy that role, just as we will never have another British President of the Commission or of the Council. Those are things we have to accept.

Linked to that is another point that I made in my Chatham House speech in November, that we need to think carefully—and much more effectively—about how we put senior British people into very important jobs in international organisations in future. That is something we have not been as good at as some other countries, and on which we need to focus more.

If I am correct in my assumption—as I said to Mr Bryant—that our means of leverage, of instrumentalising our position, are going to be reduced, one of the things we can do is try to make sure that we have people who reflect British views in important decision-making positions in important organisations.

Q102 **Chair:** May I leap in there? Are you referring obliquely to the failure to get a judge on to the ICJ, and to get a position on ACABQ?

Sir Simon Fraser: No. I was not referring to that³. That is one of the issues we need to be aware of. It is evidence in support of my argument that our leverage is potentially eroding. We were not able to secure that position, we lost our place on the ACABQ—the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions in the UN—and, of course, we have the vote on the Chagos Islands and things like that.

But I was making a slightly different point, which is that there are very important positions that come up in the UN and other international organisations—the IMF, the World Bank—and we should be actively and

³ Clarification from witness: should read as 'not referring to the ICJ'

strategically trying to position British people in those important roles for the future.

To be honest with you, one of my experiences in Government was that it was sometimes quite difficult to engage our Ministers in being active—as active I would have liked them to have been—in supporting high-quality British candidates. That is an important thing for us to focus on in the future.

Q103 Mike Gapes: Can I go back to the P5+1 model? Both Cathy Ashton and Lord Owen, who gave evidence to us last week, said that the P5+1 model—this ad hoc grouping model—would be an effective tool for the UK after Brexit. Do you agree with that and, if so, what specific issues should UK leadership focus on to be most effective?

Sir Simon Fraser: I agree, but on the right issue. In diplomacy, you have to find the model that fits the issue. On Iran, that was certainly the model that fitted the issue. It brought the key players in. It brought the Americans in in a way that allowed them to engage in an international process, which, of course, is very difficult for them⁴ with Iran because of the state of the bilateral relationship. It was very good in that instance, and it is great that Britain was a part of it. We should certainly be looking for similar instances.

Whether there will be future occasions when Britain will be able to take a lead in fora such as that is an interesting question. I don't see why the international community shouldn't look to Britain to take a lead in some areas of foreign policy. For example, I could think of Nigeria, possibly, or Somalia, where we have taken the lead already—areas where there is potentially conflict or an issue to be resolved, where Britain has a particular locus and could offer to give leadership. The international community might welcome that, so I don't discount that at all.

Q104 Mike Gapes: Does the FCO have the expertise, the capacity and the resources and power to lead such efforts?

Sir Simon Fraser: Such efforts would—as I have said before—need to be cross-Government efforts. If you look at where the resources lie, you need to—

Q105 Mike Gapes: You're talking about DFID?

Sir Simon Fraser: DFID, the MOD and others. You need to align all of these resources in instruments of foreign policy in one area. As I said, the Foreign Office's goal is to give the policy leadership and the thought leadership and bring the convening power to that. Does the Foreign Office have the expertise? I believe it does. Whether it has the expertise in sufficient numbers or depth is another matter.

In your report on diplomacy in Europe, which I read last night, you make the very interesting point that we want more diplomacy in Europe and more diplomacy in the rest of the world at a time when the Foreign

⁴ Clarification from witness: should read as 'was very difficult for them'



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Office's budget has been successively cut, certainly since 2010 and even before that. We continue to have this debate and, frankly, nothing very significant changes. The elastic is being pulled tighter, so the Foreign Office has to rob Peter to pay Paul all the time, and that is not satisfactory. As Lord Hague has also said, we need to find a way of giving a one-off injection of additional resource to help our diplomacy.

Q106 **Mike Gapes:** As you have already touched on, hollowing out the FCO by setting up other Departments—establishing a separate Department for International Trade and putting all those resources and expertise into the Department for Exiting the European Union, although we do not seem to be aware of many results—is also a problem, isn't it?

Sir Simon Fraser: We are trying to do an awful lot of things. Let's face it: Brexit is a massive challenge for Whitehall, and I am not surprised that it is sucking resource towards it. Clearly, we need to establish a new trade policy and negotiating capability in Whitehall. I do not challenge the purpose of those machinery of government changes, but whether they have been done in the most effective manner and whether it is the right constellation for the future delivery of Global Britain or any future foreign policy is another matter. Personally, for example, I would like to see close alignment between our international trade policy and our foreign policy, and between our development policy and our foreign policy, even if they are in separate Departments, to the extent that OECD rules allow. Making sure that the whole Government is operating behind shared, clearly defined objectives is really important, and the machinery has to reflect that.

Q107 **Ian Murray:** Following on from some of those themes, where do you think the UK will be if the Government do Brexit on the trajectory that they seem to be moving towards but do not do Global Britain? Where would that leave us?

Sir Simon Fraser: We need to do Brexit, of course, and we do not know how long it is going to take. That is assuming that we do it; my personal view is that there is still a meaningful vote to be had on the nature of Brexit and what happens thereafter. But it is going to take time to do that, and it is going to absorb a lot of resources. At the same time, we have to do domestic policy and address domestic issues, many of which I think lay behind the Brexit vote—we have to do Domestic Britain as well as Global Britain—and we have to have a coherent foreign policy, whether you call it Global Britain or whatever. We cannot not do that. To focus on doing Brexit and ignore the shaping of our future foreign policy along the way would be a very unwise course of action for this country—one that actually would be contrary to the character and self-image of this country in any case.

Q108 **Ian Murray:** You are also making the point, I guess, that the FCO at this moment in time is under-resourced to deliver both.

Sir Simon Fraser: Well, the point I am making is that it is not only the FCO that would be delivering it, but I do feel that the FCO is under-resourced—it is difficult as the former permanent secretary to say this,



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because people expect you to say it, but I think it is true—and both needs to and can give greater clarity of thought leadership on the agenda. *[Interruption.]*

Chair: I will suspend the session for 15 minutes, as we have to go and vote.

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

On resuming—

Q109 **Chair:** Sir Simon, I apologise for the break due to the votes. This is somewhat bizarre because we are going to restart the sitting for a very brief period.

What is your view of the FCO's recent move to strengthen the EU at the expense of Asia? You have touched on that already but isn't it a bit of robbing Peter to pay Paul? Doesn't it risk making a bit of a nonsense of Global Britain, if all we are doing is reinforcing a European network that we have got to reinforce because we are no longer meeting in Brussels?

Sir Simon Fraser: There is quite a long history of this because we have stripped resource out of the bilateral European embassies over a number of years. As I said before, we have also pursued a deliberate policy of further boosting our representation in the so-called emerging powers, over the past seven years or so.

If we are now shifting resource back from the emerging powers into the European bilateral embassies, I think that is a shame, though I can understand why it is being done. As you say, it does not cohere very well with the idea of Global Britain.

The other problem about these things is that these resource allocations have to be done strategically over time. If you keep on changing course every five or six years, you don't actually get the benefit. It is a shame if the Foreign Office is obliged to rob Peter to pay Paul, as you say, but I understand why they need to beef up those European bilateral embassies.

The other point I want to make has come up before in the Committee's discussions, I think. I believe that our representation in Brussels, far from being reduced, is going to have to be increased, because we are going to have a far bigger task on our hands of lobbying, finding out information and influencing decisions in the European Union as a non-member than at present. It is quite instructive to look at the size of the American embassy in Brussels or to look at the relative weight of the Norwegian representation there to see how you actually need a significant resource to do that.

Q110 **Chair:** That may not necessarily be Foreign Office personnel.

Sir Simon Fraser: That may not all be Foreign Office personnel; that is correct. Some of it will but not all.

Q111 **Chair:** You may see the Foreign Office offering more of a platform and a



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co-ordination function for, for example, DEFRA and Home Office staff.

Sir Simon Fraser: Which is the case at present. If we narrow our focus to the specific foreign policy defence and security issues, which are this Committee's primary focus, nevertheless the Foreign Office will have to engage in those activities. If, indeed, we are to have the sort of relationship in those areas that this Committee is advocating, we are still going to have to be very active, and boost rather than reduce the resource to achieve it.

Q112 **Ian Murray:** Sir Simon, you made your views with regard to Brexit as a foreign policy, both publicly and in your Chatham House speech. You said in one of your Twitter posts that the politics of Brexit were tragedy masquerading as farce. What does that say about Britain's place in the world and its future place in the world?

Sir Simon Fraser: What I am trying to say, as an observer of this, is that it is frustrating that 14 months away from the date of leaving we do not seem to have a negotiating position in place. The complicated politics behind Brexit is preventing that. I think that is shame. I realise that these are very important matters and they are being discussed in Government, but if you look at that from the outside—from the foreign policy perspective—this goes back to a question asked earlier: the impression this is giving of the country in the world is a matter of some concern. It is not enhancing our reputation. I hope we can focus on our Brexit negotiating position and bringing clarity to our thinking about what it means for our role in the world. It is a tough world out there, and there are not a lot of people queuing up to do us favours, so we need very coherent positions, and positions that we can defend effectively.

Q113 **Ian Murray:** If you were still permanent secretary at the Foreign Office, would that be the advice you would be giving the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary at the moment?

Sir Simon Fraser: The advice I would be giving the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary is indeed that. From the perspective of our international position, it is important that we are capable of conducting the negotiation with the European Union effectively and coherently and that we have realistic and well-founded understanding of the economic and political consequences. We establish our positions in the light of that, and we therefore establish an international platform that is credible and that we can pursue.

Q114 **Mike Gapes:** I want to ask about the increased need for people with language skills. If we are to have more people in different European capitals, presumably that also means that we have got to have more people speaking quite small countries' languages. Nevertheless it is probably not sensible to have no UK-based person who can speak the local language.

Sir Simon Fraser: That is desirable in all diplomatic posts, whether in Europe or elsewhere in the world. Of course, you have to be realistic about the amount of resource you can devote to that. Actually, diplomatic



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business in Europe is conducted essentially in English. It is one of the great contributions we have made to the European Union that, as we leave, we will leave our language with them, to operate with in future. So I do not think it is a huge problem in Europe, although of course—

Chair: The Irish may feel that they have some ownership of the language.

Sir Simon Fraser: Indeed. Shared ownership.

Q115 **Mike Gapes:** I am thinking more of the bilateral understanding of what is happening in the society. It is not just a question of interrelation with other diplomats or Government; it is a question of how you get the real feel for a country if you cannot understand their television programmes or read their newspapers.

Sir Simon Fraser: I agree with that. Of course, it was something that William Hague emphasised very strongly when he was Foreign Secretary. We established the new language school and put a lot of money into improving the language training. We were focusing mainly on the so-called hard languages that take a long time and a lot of investment to learn. Of course, at that time we were linking it particularly to what we called the emerging powers—

Mike Gapes: Yes, we visited that a few weeks ago.

Sir Simon Fraser: Exactly—it is very impressive. But it is true that we should also focus on making sure that we speak the variety of European languages across the European network.

Q116 **Mike Gapes:** And that will not be just the big languages, like Italian, German and Polish. It may mean that you have to have someone who speaks Latvian or Hungarian.

Sir Simon Fraser: Yes is the answer. But also bear in mind that we have locally engaged staff in those countries who are nationals of those countries. They are obviously very able to give the embassy a feel into the society. So it is getting the right balance.

Q117 **Chair:** If there are no further questions, I have one final one. As you will be aware, the Foreign Office has just got some £400 million from the sale of the embassy in Bangkok. What would you do with the money?

Sir Simon Fraser: I am not familiar with the detail of that, and of course that will be on the Foreign Office's capital budget rather than on its operational budget, so there may be constraints on what the Foreign Office can do with that under the Treasury rules.

So if I may, I do not think I will answer the question in detail. But certainly if the Foreign Office had a windfall of several hundreds of million pounds, I would invest it in people—in staff—definitely, I would try to strengthen our position in Europe and I would try to maintain our global presence around the world. Because if Global Britain or any sort of British foreign policy is going to succeed, we will need to have more people working harder around the world to represent this country, to get us a hearing and to get



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our way in international discussion than we have at the moment. It is the people who are the heart of our diplomacy, so that is where I would focus the money.

Chair: Sir Simon, thank you very much indeed for your contribution and your evidence.